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A NEW COUNTY BREEDING RECORD FOR BLACK-BILLED MAGPIES: SYMPTOM OF HABITAT CHANGES IN A GRASSLAND LANDSCAPE

By

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INTRODUCTION

Black-billed Magpies (*Pica hudsonia*)* occur within a range in North America that encompasses portions of Alaska, five Canadian provinces and 17 western and mid-western states in the U.S. (Trost 1999). Habitat for Black-billed Magpies is characterized by strips of riparian vegetation, thickets or scattered trees associated with open grasslands or sagebrush rangelands (Bock and Lepthien 1975, Trost 1999). The eastern limits of their range generally corresponds to a zone between the 95th and 100th meridians (Ibid.), even though appropriate habitat apparently exists east of this boundary (Bock and Lepthien 1975).

Stevenson (1971) and Bock and Lepthien (1975) have proposed that this eastern limit is determined by the species' inability to tolerate high temperatures and humidity. At high temperatures, Black-billed Magpies have limited abilities to regulate their body temperature through evaporative cooling (Hayworth and Weathers 1984). Both Stevenson (1971) and Hayworth and Weathers (1984) reported the death of several Black-billed Magpies when ambient temperatures during laboratory experiments reached 36-42° C. Stevenson (1971) reported relative humidities of 46-67% during his tests.

Black-billed Magpies are a common resident in western Kansas but are casual visitors in eastern portions of the state during fall and winter (Thompson and Ely 1992). The counties in Kansas where breeding has been reported occur north and west of a line extending through Meade, Ford, Reno, Ellsworth and Dickinson Counties (Figure 1). Thompson and Ely (1992) reported breeding in 34 of these Kansas Counties, while Kansas Breeding Bird Atlas records confirm breeding by this species in 13 additional counties (Busby and Zimmerman in press). Finally, a nest with eggs has also been reported from Harvey County (B. Dester, pers. comm.). Saline county is at the eastern periphery of this species' range (Figure 1), and breeding by Black-billed Magpies has not been documented there. Indeed,

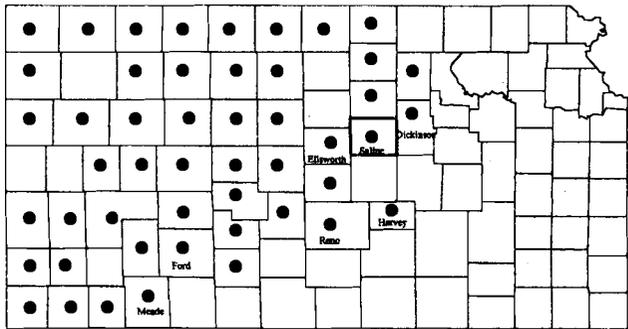


Figure 1. — Kansas counties where breeding by Black-billed Magpies has been documented. Saline County is outlined in bold. Data from Thompson and Ely (1992) and Busby and Zimmerman (in press).

*American Ornithologists' Union. 2000. Forty-second supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds. *Auk* 117:851

Thompson and Ely (1992) report that there is not even a sight record for this county.

BREEDING LOCATION IN SALINE COUNTY

Since 1998 we have been conducting a Land Condition Trend Analysis/Bioassessment at the Kansas Regional Training Center Range (KRTCR) in Saline County, Kansas (Brock, Charlton and Jonas 1998). Located southwest of Salina, KRTCR is a 1,417 ha site administered by the Kansas Army National Guard for weapons training. KRTCR is characterized by loamy soils in the Wells-Crete-Lancaster Association and the Lancaster-Hedville-Crete Association (Palmer et al. 1992). KRTCR lies within an area identified by Wilson (1978) as the Smoky Hill physiographic province, and by Kuchler (1974) as a transition zone between tallgrass prairie to the east and mixed-grass prairie to the west. Grassland vegetation is the predominant land cover at KRTCR, represented by both unplowed prairie and re-seeded farmland. Numerous hedgerows, composed primarily of Osage Orange (*Maclura pomifera*), dissect the landscape along roads and former field boundaries. Many grassland areas at KRTCR are being invaded by Osage Orange, resulting in savannah-like conditions in some areas and isolated scattered trees in other areas. Many topographical drainages in the landscape have associated strips of riparian woody vegetation as well. The surrounding landscape is characterized by rangeland to the north and west, and cultivated agricultural land to the south and east.

We frequently saw Black-billed Magpies at KRTCR during all seasons. Flocks of up to 15 birds have been observed during the winter, while smaller groups, pairs and single birds were seen at other times of the year. A regular location at KRTCR where this species was observed was around the shooting ranges and associated facilities located near the main entrance in the northeast corner of the property. The bulky, globose nests of this species were visible at various locations, usually situated within an isolated Osage Orange.

Bird surveys were conducted along numerous standardized sampling transects at KRTCR during May/June (Cully and Winter 2000). While conducting a morning survey at approximately 0730 on 10 June, 1999, Winter observed three fledgling Black-billed Magpies sitting in two trees within the boundaries of the transect being sampled. The fledglings were distinguished by their short stubby tails and were occasionally vocalizing. Upon the approach of an adult the vocalizations of the fledglings increased greatly, and they began hopping between branches in their respective trees. The adult landed between two of the fledglings in one tree, and a distinct vocalization could be heard at that time, presumably that of the adult.

By hopping with partially outstretched wings, the two fledglings approached/mobbed the adult. A transfer of food may have occurred between the adult and fledglings before the adult flew off, but the jostling movements of the birds precluded any confirmation of this. Thompson and Ely (1992) mention that Black-billed Magpie fledglings are fed for several days by the adults after they have left their nest. The third fledgling remained in the other tree and was moving about within that tree while the adult was interacting with the other two fledglings. While conducting an evening survey along the same transect at approximately 1900 on the same date, the three fledglings were again observed in the same two trees. No adults were observed at this time and the vocalizations of the fledglings were much less frequent than during the morning observation period.

The transect that was being sampled when these observations were made was located at T15S, R4W, NW 1/4 SEC. 27. The topography at this location was slightly rolling and the vegetation was characterized by warm season grasses, abundant scattered Osage Orange and scattered clumps of Smooth Sumac (*Rhus glabra*). The trees that the fledglings were in were part of a denser aggregation of trees growing within a slight topographical drainage. Vocalizations very similar to those heard during the previously described observation were heard by Winter at another location (T15S, R4W, SW 1/4 SEC.14) at KRTCR on 14 June 1999. A screen of Osage Orange prevented observation of the individuals producing these vocalizations, and the necessity of completing scheduled surveys precluded further

investigation. The vegetation at this location was similar to that present where the fledglings were observed on 10 June, and the distance between the two locations is approximately 2.25 km. It is possible that what was heard at this location was another group of fledglings.

DISCUSSION

Black-billed Magpies occur at KRTCR because their required habitat, scattered trees and thickets associated with open grasslands, is abundant and well distributed throughout the site. However, the presence of Black-billed Magpie habitat at KRTCR is indicative of habitat changes that have occurred in recent history. Historical accounts from settlers of the Smoky Hill region and Saline County describe woody vegetation being associated primarily with rivers and streams, with the uplands characterized by open prairie (Ise 1996). We have examined aerial photos of KRTCR that reveal a substantial proliferation of woody vegetation at the site within the previous 40 years. The amount of woody vegetation in Kansas rangelands is typically a result of the frequency and season of burning that occurs in those rangelands (Launchbaugh 1972, Smith and Owensby 1972, Bragg and Hulbert 1976), and the presence of woody vegetation at KRTCR in part reflects the fire suppression activities at that location. Osage Orange, the primary woody species that is invading upland areas at KRTCR, is not native to Kansas but has been used extensively in windbreaks and living fencerows in the Great Plains and adjacent areas (Great Plains Flora Association 1986, Steyermark 1996). The hedgerows at KRTCR effectively fragment the open, continuous, nature of the grassland landscape, and they provide the seed source for the trees invading the grassland areas.

Population declines of many grassland birds have been sufficient to merit great concern among conservationists (Herkert 1995, Knopf 1996, Peterjohn and Sauer 1999). Woody vegetation can negatively effect grassland birds through its influence on predation and nest parasitism rates (Johnson and Temple 1990) as well as its influence on the area and perimeter-area ratios of habitat patches (Herkert 1994, Helzer and Jelinski 1999, Walk and Warner 1999). Proliferation of woody vegetation in many areas of the Great Plains has undoubtedly influenced the avian communities of this region (Knopf 1996), and the presence of woody vegetation in upland herbaceous communities at KRTCR has a dramatic influence on the bird communities there (Cully and Winter 2000).

We believe a sound conservation strategy that addresses the biological resources at KRTCR should include a drastic reduction in the amount of woody vegetation within and adjacent to the grassland areas there. This will doubtless be detrimental to Black-billed Magpies. However, Saline County is at the eastern edge of this species range and is an area that this species is apparently not physiologically well adapted to occupy. The negative impact that woody vegetation likely has on grassland birds at KRTCR should be of greater concern than its positive impact on Black-billed Magpies, a species that reflects habitat changes that have occurred in this grassland environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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MAJOR BIRD MORTALITY AT A TOPEKA TELEVISION TOWER

By

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Ball et al. (1995) documented that there has been major avian mortality at least occasionally during the fall at the KTKA-TV tower, located ca. 18 km west of Topeka, Shawnee County (39° 02'N, 95° 55'W). Since the above synopsis, we are aware of at least one other major mortality event, involving hundreds of birds, in late September 1996 (Joanne Brier, pers. comm.) and numerous smaller occurrences (Mike Cadell, KTKA-TV tower manager, pers. comm.). In view of these prior observations coupled with the fact that there is increasing pressure to erect numerous additional towers to meet communication demands (Manville 1999), Young and Robbins, with support from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, initiated a two-year study of this tower in the spring of 1999. Here we report yet another major mortality event that occurred in the early morning hours of 9 October 1999. Although most reports of avian casualties at communication towers simply list species and numbers, we have followed Tordoff and Mengel's (1956) example of providing age, sex, and mass for those species where there were relatively large sample sizes.

Pied-billed Grebe <i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	1
Sora <i>Porzana carolina</i>	1
Mourning Dove <i>Zenaidra macroura</i>	3
Yellow-shafted Flicker <i>Colaptes auratus</i>	4
Red-eyed Vireo <i>Vireo olivaceus</i>	1
Blue-headed Vireo <i>Vireo solitarius</i>	1
Blue Jay <i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	1
Brown Creeper <i>Certhia americana</i>	4
House Wren <i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	6
Winter Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1
Sedge Wren <i>Cistothorus platensis</i>	4
Marsh Wren <i>Cistothorus palustris</i>	10
Golden-crowned Kinglet <i>Regulus satrapa</i>	4
Ruby-crowned Kinglet <i>Regulus calendula</i>	3
Swainson's Thrush <i>Catharus ustulatus</i>	2
Gray Catbird <i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>	2
Orange-crowned Warbler <i>Vermivora celata</i>	117
Nashville Warbler <i>Vermivora ruficapilla</i>	18
Yellow-rumped Warbler <i>Dendroica coronata</i>	151
Bl.-throated Blue Warbler <i>Dendroica caerulescens</i>	1
Palm Warbler <i>Dendroica palmarum</i>	1
Black-and-white Warbler <i>Mniotilta varia</i>	1
Common Yellow-throat <i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	20
Wilson's Warbler <i>Wilsonia pusilla</i>	1
Chipping Sparrow <i>Spizella passerina</i>	1
Clay-colored Sparrow <i>Spizella pallida</i>	7
Savannah Sparrow <i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	73
Grasshopper Sparrow <i>Ammodramus savannarum</i>	6
Le Conte's Sparrow <i>Ammodramus leconteii</i>	2
Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow <i>Ammodramus nelsoni</i>	1
Song Sparrow <i>Melospiza melodia</i>	1
Lincoln's Sparrow <i>Melospiza lincolni</i>	12
Swamp Sparrow <i>Melospiza georgiana</i>	6
White-throated Sparrow <i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>	1
Indigo Bunting <i>Passerina cyanea</i>	1
Unidentified	9
Total	478

Table 1. — Species and numbers found dead at the KTKA-TV tower, Shawnee County, Kansas at dawn on 9 October 1999.

Barber visited the tower at dawn on 9 October 1999, and quickly realized that there had been a major kill during the night. Given the weather conditions (clear sky until 0300, cloudy thereafter with a light, 5 - 10 km, NW wind) and how fresh the casualties appeared, we feel confident that most of the mortality occurred between 0300 and dawn. We suspect that the combination of the following features makes this tower a major source of avian mortality: height of 439 m, 27 guy wires for support, ridge top location, with red obstruction and red beacon lighting.

RESULTS

A total of 478 individuals of 35 species were found. Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) and Orange-crowned warblers and Savannah Sparrows constituted 71 % of the total birds killed (Table 1). Based on weather data and the complete lack of western taxa, we hypothesize that most of the birds originated from

Canada and the north-central United States a few days earlier. An average night distance estimate for thrush-size (*Catharus, Hylocichla*) passerines ranges from 200 - 700 km ("typically" 300 km; Cochran et al. 1997; Cochran and Kjos 1985). Presumably, smaller passerines average shorter distances/night; therefore, we hypothesize that most birds killed at the tower left an area stretching from northern Kansas to northern Nebraska during the early night of 8 October.

Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Dendroica caerulescens*). The single immature male (KU 90017) found was the sixth (5 males, 1 female, all immature) tower kill during the fall in Kansas. Compared to females, which are sometimes misidentified as other *Dendroica*, males are relatively conspicuous and easy to identify.

Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*). At least two subspecies were involved, but because of the complex and convoluted taxonomy of this species (see Phillips 1986 and Kroodsma and Verner 1997) it was impossible to ascertain which populations were involved. Moreover, because of the poor condition of most of the wrens only two specimens, both representing the same subspecies, were preserved (KU 90022-3). Eight of the ten birds were adults.

Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata celata*). All 117 individuals were of the nominate subspecies. Of those sexed, aged, and weighed (in grams): 30 ad. males ($x=9.6\pm 0.6$), 32 ad. females (9.0 ± 0.5), 20 immature males (9.8 ± 0.5), 28 immature females (9.4 ± 0.5).

Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata coronata*). All 151 individuals were assignable to the "Myrtle" Warbler. Of those sexed, aged, and weighed (in grams): 43 ad. males ($x = 12.4\pm 0.7$), 31 ad. females (11.6 ± 0.6), 37 immature males (12.6 ± 0.9), 39 immature females (12.1 ± 0.7).

Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*). Specimens ranged from being relatively pale overall with a limited amount of yellow in the lores to individuals that were darker with a more intense amount of yellow. Rising (1996) states that morphological variation across most of this species' range is clinal and there subspecific identification is problematic. Of those sexed, aged, and weighed (in grams): 29 ad. males (17.3 ± 0.8), 31 ad. females (16.2 ± 0.8), 4 immature males (16.3 ± 1.25), 2 immature females.

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THE BLACK PHOEBE: A HYPOTHETICAL SPECIES FOR KANSAS.

By
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On the warm evening of 16 March 1976 about 45 minutes before sunset, I observed a Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) in Morton County, Kansas. The bird's presence was determined by a call note with which I was not familiar. Once located, the bird was easily identified as a Black Phoebe (a mid-sized black flycatcher with a white belly), a species I had observed in Arizona several years earlier. It was foraging around one of the fish ponds eight miles north and one mile west of Elkhart. The bird was in good light and I observed it sally for insects no less than a dozen times. I followed it from the north end of one of the ponds south to the trees along the Cimarron River, then back north to the pond. I spent over twenty minutes observing the phoebe with 7X binoculars. The bird could not be approached any closer than 30 feet.

Additional observations of the Black Phoebe in Kansas include one in Shawnee County (Thompson and Ely 1992). Two birds were observed in Augusta, Butler County on 24 November 1997 by Mr. and Mrs. Bill Broadstock. The Broadstocks observed the black bills of the species at close range (6 feet out their picture window) and were emphatic that they were not reporting juncos, a winter bird of their yard (Barnes 1997). Most recently, one phoebe was observed by Florence Macy in her yard just east of the Fort Hays State University campus, Ellis County on 31 March 2000 (Greg Farley pers. comm.).

Migration is limited in the species and the bird primarily wanders in response to local climatic conditions (Bent 1942). Inland populations at the northern edge of its range are migratory (Wolf 1997). Although spring migration data are scarce, individuals do return to Colorado as early as March (Andrews and Righter 1992). The species nested sporadically from 1972 through 1987 in Pueblo County, Colorado, a distance of 160 to 180 miles WNW from Morton County (Ibid.). A juvenile phoebe was observed at this location again on 21 June 1992 after nest building in April (Prather 1993). An additional eastern Colorado nest record reported was obtained during the Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas Project in Las Animas County, just 69 miles west of the Morton County, Kansas border (Kingery 1998). A single phoebe was observed just west of the Kansas line near the town of Hale, Yuma County, Colorado 12 June 1988 (Andrews and Righter 1992) and most recently a single phoebe was observed in Ft. Collins on 6 May 1995 (Ely 1995).

Fifteen observations have been made in four Texas Panhandle counties since 1952 with one observation only 47 miles south of the Kansas border in Ochiltree County (Seyffert 2000). Until recently, the species had not been reported in Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992). A Black Phoebe was found by Jeri McMahon in Muskogee County, Oklahoma on 27 October 1999 and was last observed on 8 December (J. McMahon pers. comm.).

Extralimital Black Phoebes have been observed wandering to Vancouver, British Columbia, western Washington, southeastern Texas, Florida, Idaho and Minnesota (AOU 1998). Until a Kansas ornithologist with camera in hand encounters the phoebe in one of our 105 counties, this species should retain its hypothetical status for Kansas.

I thank Charles A. Ely, John M. Schukman and Sara J. Shane for reading an earlier draft of this note, and Jeri McMahon, Bob Jennings, James Barnes, Dave Rintoul, Galen Pittman, and William H. Busby and the Kansas Biological Survey for variety assistance.

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Chipping Sparrow Trapped by *Taraxacum*. — While walking a stretch of Timber Creek, Scott State Park, Scott County, Kansas with Mike and Pam Ramsey during the North American Migration Count on 8 May 1999, I observed a small bird fluttering ahead in an area of short grass used for picnicking. We ran toward the bird, expecting it to be injured or possibly in the process of being captured by a snake. Instead, we found a second year Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) trapped by a dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) that had gone to seed. The dandelion is a very abundant European exotic in the park. One of the involucre bracts was wrapped around one of the sparrow's tarsi. The tip of the bract was adhered to the base by resin from the plant. It took a moderate amount of effort to free the bird from the tiny plant part.

In his book, Terres discusses deathtraps in the accident section (Terres, J. K. 1980. The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds, Knopf), where small ground sparrows and blackbirds are occasionally trapped by weed stems and grasses. The only flower part mentioned responsible as a deathtrap was that of the prickly burrs of the burdock plant (*Arctium minus*). A Chipping Sparrow in Quebec, Canada was found hanged by two human hairs below its nest (Fillmore, E. R., and R. D. Titman. 1997. Chipping Sparrow hanged. Can. Field-Nat. 91:96). The seeds of dandelions are occasionally used as a food source by Chipping Sparrows (Martin, A. C. et al. 1951. American Wildlife & Plants. Dover, New York). E. H. Forbush considered the dandelion an important spring food of the sparrow (Middleton, A. L. 1998. Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*), In The Birds of North America, No. 334 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.) The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA). The chance of a sparrow being trapped by a dandelion should be fairly low.

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